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FEUDALISM IN AMERICAN  
POLITICS





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# Feudalism In American Politics.

An Address by  
SAMUEL HARDEN CHURCH  
before  
The Western University of Pennsylvania  
at Carnegie Music Hall  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Commencement, June 20th, 1901.



# ADDRESS.

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## Feudalism in American Politics.

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BY

SAMUEL HARDEN CHURCH.

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W. J. HOLLAND.

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I am highly complimented by the request contained in your letter of this date. If you really feel that the publication of the address will serve a good civic purpose, I have no objection whatever to having it printed. I am,

Yours very sincerely,

S. H. CHURCH.

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Acting Chancellor Brashear, in introducing Mr. Church, said: "We all love him for the work he has done. His great 'Life of Cromwell,' his beautiful historical novel, 'John Marmaduke,' his busy life in the Pennsylvania Railroad service, make up only a part of his useful activities. He will speak to-night on 'Feudalism in American Politics,' and I am sure we shall all be wiser men and women after listening to his address."

## Feudalism in American Politics.

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It is a thing pleasing to every patriotic man that the young men of this nation are displaying an increasing activity in politics. As the country grows richer and the people become more settled in habits and customs, a larger share of popular attention is naturally given to public affairs. Colleges and universities, through their courses of study in the political and social sciences, are forming an educated public opinion in men trained to reason and to think; and the participation of such men in the discussion of present day problems will add tremendously to their right solution. Under the general subject, "Feudalism in American Politics," certain baneful and dangerous tendencies will be considered, not because the evil situation is a hopeless one, but because its efficacious remedy can be so easily applied. It is not intended to present a pessimistic or unwholesome view of political conditions in America. On the contrary, the purpose is to arouse in capable hearts an aspiration for the destruction of public abuses through a saving sense of civic obligation.

Politics is government. The right to govern in America is not placed in one man, as in a monarchy, nor in a few men, as in an oligarchy, but it is the heritage which every citizen receives from the fathers. The fatal neglect of that heritage invites its decay. Its preservation requires that every American should be in politics,—not for office, for that is the last thing a young man should seek,—but to guard the State. While some progress has been made in establishing a civil service in this country, there is no permanent tenure, and no assured promotion in public life. With every change of government, thousands of experienced men are dismissed without due cause, only to find themselves unfitted for the exacting requirements of private business life. In England it is not so. Take a single department there—the Colonial office of Great Britain. There are twenty-four clerks in that office, every one a graduate of either Oxford or Cambridge, with a degree as high at least as M.A. These men are retained at

good salaries until superannuated, and they handle and direct all the potent colonial energies of that mighty empire. The Colonial Secretary may or may not be an able statesman; in either case he knows but little of the details of his own administration. In England when a young man aspires to a public career, he is graduated from the university, and duly enters Parliament. If he displays signal ability he becomes a permanent figure in political life. When one is invited to dinner to meet the public servants of England, he knows that he will come in contact with men trained to great affairs; the empire can offer him no more stimulating intercourse. Here it is different. Our public men rise to view for a moment, and then disappear. We have no diplomatic service, and the great embassies and missions are bestowed as the spoils of victory, frequently on men who are overweighted by their honors. There is but one exception, for custom now demands that our ambassador to Great Britain must be the most eminent available man in this Republic.

The greatest evil in American public life is feudalism. Feudalism in the modern sense is the exaction by irresponsible political dictators of immoral obedience from public servants and others who fear to incur their displeasure. This institution has grown up wholly through disregard of Washington's precedents in the beginning, whereby he sought to establish a sound civil service. His fundamental idea of an efficient executive force is repeated in the Farewell Address, through that solemn adjuration against the tendency of an inflamed party spirit to substitute faction for nation.

The old feudalism was introduced into England by William the Conqueror, who brought his followers to seize the richest spoil in Europe. These knights placed their hands in his and swore to be his men, in return for the promised feud, or fee, or fief, meaning the spoil of victory. And so came military service, socage, lords paramount, vassals, liegemen, the mighty barons, special privilege, hereditary aristocracy, and all the other restraints upon the natural expansion of human liberty, which produced the tyranny of absolute kings. This false system grew until the conscience and the intellect of Europe revolted; and then Cromwell overwhelmed it at Marston Moor and Naseby,

and when it flourished anew, Washington crushed it at Yorktown.

And now feudalism has crept into American politics. How well the old terms fit the case!—lords paramount, mighty barons, vassals, socage, special privilege, and all the rest of it. In theory, our present methods of choosing public servants furnish the ideal machinery of a Republican form of government. The people go to the polls at the primary elections and choose their delegates, and the delegates meet in convention and after canvassing the comparative merits of candidates decide upon their nomination by ballot, after which the nominees of all the parties are voted upon by all the people, and the one having the highest number of votes is declared elected to the office. Nothing could be better than this. The primary election is supposed to bring out the wishes of the whole mass of each party; the convention furnishes a stage for the play of oratorical power, for combination, and for the exercise of the highest human talents; and the final nomination is the result of the unrestrained wisdom and conscience of the delegates chosen by the people. How far away from the present practice this theory is need hardly be described to this audience. In some of the States political conventions are made up almost wholly of public servants, not truly elected by the people, but in effect appointed by the lords paramount; and those delegates who are not office holders usually hope to be such, not through the winning force of high character and deserving attainments, but by favor of the liege. The proceedings of such an assembly, instead of being the free expressions of the people, are really the lucubrations of the lord paramount, and when sincere at all are the more dangerous to liberty because of the care that is taken to make them conform outwardly to a shifting public opinion. In the Republican National convention at Philadelphia, in 1900, the three largest States had but one voice each,—that of the lord paramount. The delegates from those States represented no opinion, and the service could win them no distinction, because they were merely the creatures of the suzerain. Most of the other States sent free men who upset the feudalities and spoke for public opinion. Not long ago a convention was held in another State where a candidate for a

State office, who was not the choice of the lord paramount, owned a majority of the delegates; owned them in the feudal way because he had chosen them to be elected to this convention and paid all their expenses. The lord paramount demanded his withdrawal; the candidate pointed to his delegates and refused to yield. The lord paramount thereupon sent his liege-men among the delegates, and on the same afternoon, when the balloting was about to begin, the once defiant candidate announced his retirement, for the reason that his friends had suddenly deserted him. They had not been bought. They had simply yielded to an autocratic authority unrecognized in the laws of the country, but sometimes exercised above the law. In another case the aspirant for a high office in the State—an able man—had worked long and hard for delegates, and for two ballots their votes were held together under the lead of a man who was his neighbor and sworn friend; but when the third ballot began, the lord paramount in his library two hundred miles away telegraphed to this friend: "I think you had better go to Smith on this ballot." The whole delegation, including the bosom friend, obeyed, and Smith was nominated. This was not leadership; it was feudalism; and the candidate was beaten at the election. Again, when a prominent member of a legislature died, there was a large hope, born of the fact that the suzerain had just been deserted by some of his vena! followers, that he would learn wisdom and choose able and honest men henceforth; and the names of suitable men were canvassed among the people and in the newspapers. But the lord paramount settled the matter disdainfully, as becomes a lord paramount, by choosing a wholly unknown man and directing his liege-men to make the nomination and afterwards the election. New York City is in the hands of an aggregation of feudal lords, and we have a judicial declaration from Judge Jerome that the police captains in the crime districts pay the Tammany leaders \$18,000 for each appointment, and receive \$25,000 a year thereafter from the protected criminals. I have seen a letter from an over-lord to a member of a legislature, reading thus: "I do not want you to vote for that bill, or any bill on that subject." Whenever a feudal candidate claims that a certain office is his by vested right, it will usually follow

that he is not the choice of the electoral body, and that he will endeavor to attain his election by methods which ought, by their very nature, to discredit him. In Kentucky, a lord paramount who stole the governorship was assassinated by feudal men on the other side;—robbery and murder go often together. In one State a bill, a perfectly honest and proper measure, was sent to the lord paramount with the request that it be presented for the consideration of the legislature. The fact that it concerned a corporation led the suzerain to say that it could be got through the house for \$40,000, the senate for \$40,000 more, and it would require \$20,000 for the men near the Governor. He was told to withdraw it, when he sent word that it could pass both houses for \$40,000, but it must take its chances with the Governor. He received no reply. Now, in that case, the lord paramount clearly transcended the ancient feudal law which restrains the over-lord from demanding money without the consent of the barons and council except for three causes; and his eldest son was not being knighted, his eldest daughter was not being married, and he himself was not in prison.

The country has not forgotten that one senator from the far west was proved to have expended more than a million dollars in the direct purchase of his election. After being once driven from his seat, he has returned, and Senator Cushman K Davis, of Minnesota, said of him: "They say that one of our latest accessions is worth seventy-five millions. We need to offset him a man who is worth more than that in a better currency."

When we examine the character of the feudal vassals we find that they are generally men who fail at everything they undertake on their own account and are then invested with the sacred office of government because, in the parlance of the machine, they will "take orders." A young woman was heard to say: "Father has been a great shame to us, but as soon as he gets out of the workhouse this time, we have a good political position for him where he wont have anything to do." This incident is scarcely an exaggeration. If one should take a glance at the personnel of almost any large political office, and then, for the sake of comparison, a look at a similar number of employes, say, in one of our large steel works, he would perceive that under

the feudal system the political standard of efficiency is inevitably lower than that which is maintained in the business world.

There is a wide difference between a State organization maintained for party supremacy and a State machine maintained for spoils. In New York the Republican party has a powerful organization. It is not above reproach; its leadership has not always been the best; but it has had the advantage of tradition and of association with families distinguished for genius and valor; and it has therefore been a source of strength in our national development. Whenever New York is called upon to supply a man to a high office in the nation or the State, she usually chooses her ablest man,—and strangely enough, her ablest men are often found outside the party organization. Look at her record for only the short period of President McKinley's administration: Ambassador to Great Britain, Joseph H. Choate, the leader of the American bar; Secretary of War, Elihu Root, a distinguished lawyer; Secretary of the Interior, Cornelius N. Bliss; Ambassador to France, General Horace Porter; Ambassador to Germany, Andrew D. White, her foremost educator; Minister to Turkey, Oscar S. Straus; member of the Spanish Peace Commission, Whitelaw Reid; Secretary of the Spanish Peace Commission, Prof. John Bassett Moore, the highest authority on international law; members of the Hague Peace Commission, Seth Low, President of Columbia University, and Frederick W. Holls; Assistant Secretary of War, Colonel William Cary Sanger; United States Senator, Chauncey M. Depew; Commissioner of patents, Charles H. Duell; Governor of the State, Theodore Roosevelt; Vice-President of the United States, the same Theodore Roosevelt; Governor of the State again, Benjamin B. Odell, Jr. Most of these men have not only not been identified with the party organization, but they have strenuously antagonized it, notably Mr. Choate, Mr. Reid, Mr. Roosevelt, and Mr. Low. They are all leaders in intellectual and public life, and beyond criticism on the score of character or capacity; and the Republican organization assented—perhaps reluctantly sometimes—to their appointment, to the lasting glory of the commonwealth. The strongest organization man on the list, Governor Odell, has made the lord paramount stand aghast,

while the State applauds and the nation wonders at the revelation that practical politics, able administration, and honest manhood fearlessly exercised against dictation, are the true qualities of good government. This is the admirable practice in New York. In Pennsylvania—and one who has never voted, and probably never shall vote, any but the Republican ticket has the right to draw the contrast—a man who left President Lincoln's cabinet by request, organized a machine for spoils only, and neither the standard of leadership nor the principles of the organization have since been greatly elevated beyond the first patterns. In ten years with a normal Republican majority of nearly three hundred thousand, the State ticket has twice been deservedly beaten. Few eminent men are chosen to high office from Pennsylvania, and few are trained to attain eminence. A man who is bold enough to antagonise the party organization can expect no political preferment in this State. Where two men aspire to a distinguished position it has occurred that he who gives the largest check to the mysterious, potent, and unaudited campaign fund will tower above the other like Charlemagne above King Offa. It is a matter of public record that our feudal lords, calling all men to know by these presents, have executed contracts in solemn phrase construing government to mean the private business profit of the parties thereto. In a recent great schism within the party, one revolted faction might have won against the entrenched remainder—they would have been backed by the whole moral power of the State—had they but dared to stand for principles and true men, forsaking spoils. We must remember that government, being a matter of form, is, in the best sense, a machine, and it can never be a perfect machine until it shall preserve the laws and register the decrees of the people. In a city in this worst of the feudal States recently there were 27,000 fraudulent votes deposited at one election. The outraged commonwealth derives but meagre satisfaction from seeing two obscure men sent to the penitentiary who had no possible interest in the effect of their crime save their hire. A few weeks ago sixty-four election officers in the same city were indicted for receiving fraudulent votes. It is no intemperate or extravagant use of language to declare that in a Republic, the very life-blood where-

of flows from a free and pure ballot, the man who instigates the illegal casting of a single vote, or the false record of one legally cast, is a political anarchist who ought to be put to death. A single vote corrupted may strike down free government. Both parties in Pennsylvania have pledged themselves emphatically to enact a secure ballot law. With such complete agreement its passage should be prompt and unanimous. But the tergiversation of the leaders in these past few weeks has clearly shown that it is not the imperative design of either party to require that the vote shall be lawfully cast and honestly counted. Hence some people are saying that that tremendous majority will again roll backward like a wave of retribution. If it do, the calamity will not be without its palliation if it will finally overwhelm those feudal lords of both parties who in these years of spoil have sought their own aggrandizement against the public good; given us a civil service without distinction; violated every solemn public promise; impaired the high honor of the State; and introduced faction and disorder, and mutually the persuasion of legislative votes, as legitimate principles of government.

These examples of modern feudalism are chosen from a great many preserved for reference, that have filled the hearts of honest men with a sense of wrong. But it would be an iniquitous perversion of fact to attempt to persuade you that our whole political fabric is blighted by these corrupt practises. Our national government is nearly free from stain in all its parts. Why? Because the laws place the executive powers in responsible hands and leave no opportunity for the feudal lord to usurp control. So it is likewise in many States and cities. In our own city of Pittsburgh, while there are many feudal evils to redress, and some feudal men to dispossess, yet in the protection of life, the safeguard of property, the preservation of public order, and the restraint of active criminal vice, Pittsburgh is now, as she has long been, the best governed city in the world. There are thousands of good men in political positions, many of them in this city, many of them in this State, and all through this country, and they are learning more and more that public approbation and ultimate success are sure to be their rewards when they resent dictation, cultivate individuality, and initiate for them-

selves. Best of all the most arrogant lord paramount in America has never dared to put his hand on the bench, and no breath of suspicion has ever touched the pure administration of our laws.

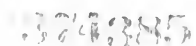
-You have recently read in your histories how nations rise like ships at sea, and go forward in power and majesty, and then, like a ship at sea, they go down below the horizon, and are seen no more. What is the cause of that? The nation is not a herd, moving with the merely stupid instinct of animal life to the destiny of brutes; but it is a highly sensitive mass, which makes a quick response always to the spur of individual thought and action; and as the predominant individuality is bigoted and cruel, or enlightened and humane, so will the nation be accordingly. Every man, every woman, is a unit in this sensitive mass. You may think your station is an insignificant one. It is not. Whatever you do that is good adds to the sum of light. Whatever you do that is ill adds to the sum of darkness. If you do nothing you add to the waste of energy. And with the good and the ill of the units in the mass, the mass itself is good or ill, and the sum total brings the nation to life or to death. That is what those pages in your history mean. It has been the fortune of these perished nations to spread their good qualities among other peoples, while they themselves chose to die in their own vices. And then other nations rise on their discarded virtues. It was so with Egypt and Assyria. Greece achieved her imperishable glories in art and literature and war while her men held the honor of the state dearest in their hearts; and when they forgot that, Sparta fell, and Athens, and Sparta again, and then Greece herself. Imperial Rome held dominion over nearly the whole world while she steadfastly cherished the teachings of Lucius that true manhood was the best jewel of Rome; but when she succumbed to luxury and vice, the Pretorian Guard snatched away her authority, degenerated into professional politicians, and sold the government to the highest bidder. And Emerson declares that the northern barbarians who overran her territory arrived not a day too soon. In our times, England, with the best civil service, has done more to spread liberty over the uttermost world than any other nation. Mankind could not look with equanimity

ity upon her decay, and if that should be threatened, we would behold the daughter spreading her mantle over the drooping mother, to bid the frowning world pass on. In the natural expansion of this country it is highly probably that we shall acquire Canada, Central America, and Mexico. But no burden will be too heavy so long as America guards the State. When she hands the government over to her Pretorian Guard, decay must come swift and sure.

When Cromwell was Protector, he directed the learned professors of the universities to mark the rising youth of England and commend to his attention such as they deemed apt for public station; and one of his contemporaries said: "If there was a man in England who excelled in any faculty or science, the Protector would find him out, and reward him according to his merit." One hundred and fifty years after the great Puritan's death Yale College was founded in this country by Cromwell's political descendants in order that youth, instructed in the arts and sciences, "through the blessing of Almighty God, may be fitted for public employment in Church and civil state." Thus, our highest and oldest traditions demand an educated and conscientious civil service.

The feudal system in America must be destroyed before good government can be secured; for feudalism and good government are essentially antagonistic. This cannot be attained by spasmodic and hysterical flocking to inexperienced "reform" candidates. It is the system itself that has grown to be bad,—not necessarily the men. The present material is good enough if constitutional checks can be devised to restrain those who are in control. The true way of reform would be to develop an enlightened and intelligent public conscience that would quicken all political deliberations; to amend municipal charters, not by persuading the votes of venal legislators, but as a response to a just public demand upon the legislature, so that full responsibility will rest in official hands; to destroy the lords paramount by putting the powers which they illegally exercise in the hands of an elected public servant; to choose such capable men to do the public business as are now chosen for the discharge of private interests; to exhort men in commerce and men in corpora-

tions to cease effacing their rights as citizens in the fear of offending the feudal barons, and overcome their present dread that active participation in public affairs is inimical to their private prosperity; to encourage an independent and fearless newspaper press to continue without malice to expose public wrongs and discomfit unfit men; and to impress upon the entire body of citizens the obligation to take part in all elections, holding delegates and others enjoying office to a strict recognition that they are not the masters but the representatives of the people. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings." One fearless man has more power to stir the public conscience to civic duty than a whole machine to stifle it by clamor and usurpation. The way to accomplish essential reforms is to join that party which is most congenial to your own political ideals, and then work within its organization until your voice is heard and your influence is felt. Independent movements are usually nothing more than a colossal waste of energy. You cannot always have your way, or your platform, or your candidate; and in that case you must compromise. Compromise is the very essence of politics, but it must be based upon honesty and expediency, and that is what you are in the organization to demand. If there is no organization, no club, near you, organize one among your neighbors. You are a sovereign if you will but exercise your prerogatives. What the bosses most dread is activity in the mass. Therefore, be active. Then, when you see signs of dishonesty or corruption, denounce it publicly, but don't leave the party. The party is like a grand army. At its head is the National Committee, having charge of the Presidential campaign and the maintenance of the organization permanently. Then there is a State Committee in each commonwealth, and under that the county and city and township committees. To fight against such a machine would be hopeless. All reforms must be sought within party lines. If there are evil men in control, their first wish is to get you out. Stay in, and get them out. Aim to secure a civil service, as Washington designed it, based upon character and efficiency, covering the whole personnel of the subordinate places, regardless of party affiliations, to be undisturbed by any election; and the cruelty



and corruption of the spoils system will disappear. The executive forces of government in State and city would then, like those of the National government, be representative of the people. When the lord paramount goes, all will go; for bribery, usurpation, false ballots, vassal conventions, corruption, venality, brutality, violence, even assassination, are the sure fruits of political feudalism. Politics is government. Politics deprived of its spoils would very nearly meet the highest aspirations of mankind. Then we shall see in place of bosses, leaders, whom we can follow with fidelity and honor, who will have no hungry army to feed, who will work for the glory of the Republic, and not for its spoils. There is a victory greater than Marston Moor or Yorktown for that man who will smite this feudalism to death. [Prolonged Applause.]



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